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The Joke as a Medium

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Article abstract

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The Joke as a Medium

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Abstract: We argue that jokes are not just about the ha-ha and laughter, but they are a technology, and a medium that create an environment and they have a serious purpose. We examine the medium of the joke making particular use of the work of three scholars who made a serious effort to understand the phenomenon of the joke and humor, namely Sigmund Freud (1916) in his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Johan Huizinga (1971) in his book *Homo Ludens* and Marshall McLuhan (1964) in his book *Understanding Media* and his other writings. For Freud jokes like dreams are the medium to reach the unconscious mind. For Huizinga play, puns and games that are closely related to jokes are a universal aspect of human culture dating back to our very origin. For McLuhan jokes are about grievances and a way people deal with them.

Keywords: jokes; laughter; fun, humor; satire, comedy, practical joke; unconscious; play; grievances; medium, technology; Freud; Huizinga, McLuhan

Smile and the whole world smiles with you! (proverb)

All the world loves a clown! (Cole Porter)

Laughter is the best medicine, the best remedy! (derived from Proverbs 17:22; also attributed to the 14th Century surgeon Henri de Mondeville and François Rabelais)

Laughter is the best medicine for a long and happy life. He who laughs lasts! (Wilfred Peterson)

Always laugh when you can. It is cheap medicine. (Lord Byron)

The Joke as a Medium

The unique human capacity among all animals to laugh and make people laugh has been a topic of interest since Aristotle (Parts of the Animals, III, 673, 9). Other works have emerged over time to problematize this uniquely human characteristic, such as Quintilian (c. 30-c. 100), Lucian of Samosata (c. 125-c. 195) and Julius Pollux (2nd century AD). In this article, we intend to explore the idea that jokes in addition to being a universal form of human expression, have all the characteristics of a medium. In other words, these complex forms of social interaction bring with them the potential for use as extensions of the human mind, in processes of sociability, ritualization and expression of power, whether consciously or unconsciously. For this, we investigate some aspects of social theory – in particular, the theoretical approaches of Freud (1901), McLuhan (1964), Huizinga (1971) and Goffman (1979) on the phenomena of the ludic universe.

We begin our investigation of the joke as a medium by considering what could be defined as a joke. The linguist Robert Hetzron (1991) defines a joke in the following terms:

> A joke is a short humorous piece of oral literature in which the funniness culminates in the final sentence, called the punchline… In fact, the main condition is that the tension should reach its highest level at the very end. No continuation relieving the tension should be added. As for its being "oral," it is true that jokes may appear printed, but when further transferred, there is no obligation to reproduce the text verbatim, as in the case of poetry.

This is an accurate description of one type of a joke, namely one in which there is a punchline; but it does not take into account all the forms of joking. Not all forms of joking are as formal as Hetzron definition which describes the situation in which the joke teller sets out to tell a funny story that will make people laugh. Some of the best humor or joking takes place in the form of adlibbing in which in the course of a conversation someone makes a humorous remark that causes people to laugh. In fact, we believe that the most humorous form of joking is in fact the adlib joke.

There are many forms of jokes and many aspects of human behavior associated with jokes such as fun, humor, jest, joshing, comedy, satire, and amusement. Before getting into the heart of our study of jokes we believe it is instructive to examine the etymology of the words associated with jokes.

Etymology of the Word Joke and the Words Associated with Jokes

We take the etymology of the word joke from https://www.etymonline.com/:
Joke (n): 1660s, joque, "a jest, something done to excite laughter," from Latin *iocus* joke, jest, sport, pastime."

The etymology of the words associated with jokes such as funny, fun, humor, jest, joshing, comedy, comedian, comic, satire, amuse, muse and amusement which might help us understand the phenomenon of the joke and the joke as a medium can be found the appendix at the end of this article.

The Scope of our Study

For the purposes of our understanding the medium of the joke we will include those jokes that are formal stories with a punch line as defined by Hetzron (1991) above, adlib jokes, jesting, joking, joshing, satire, comedy routines and even practical jokes. In short things that we find funny, humorous or make us laugh or at least smile. This means that we will also need to consider amusements, comedy, comedians and comics as well as jokes and joking. We also need to consider practical jokes given that jokes are funny and we laugh and find it funny when something goes awry.

Joking and Laughter as Human Experience

In anthropological theory, there is a well-known category of universal validity, called "Joking Relationships". It involves a link between kinship and humor, ritually attaching to some kinds of relatives a tacitly 'moral obligation' of teasing, mocking or making fun out of a definite relative. The most obvious example for Westerners would be the relation between a husband and his mother-in-law, motive of many jokes and puns. In the so-called 'primitive' societies, joking relationships were carefully studied by Lowie (1920), Mauss (1925) and Radcliffe-Brown (1949) among many others. Unfortunately, those anthropologists focused their analysis treating this phenomenon rather as a matter of kinship, than as a matter of joking. As Palmer (1994) points out, we have lost a chance to understand what is taken as funny in tribal societies.

Some years ago, Brazilian actress and film-maker Letícia Sabatella directed a documentary in 2009 called *Hotxuá* (https://www.filmaffinity.com/au/film248081.html) about the "sacred clown" that is part of *Krahô* culture of Central Brazil. The 'Hotxuá' is a gifted member of those societies, a kind of shaman

whose powers come from his ability to make people laugh. To do so, he is allowed to dress like a woman, to mimic other people, to interfere with rituals and other ‘weird’ things. Both the Hotxuá and joking relationships in general are connected to the possibility of expanding and relaxing by means of laughter a social order that is often too tight and implacable towards offenders. A medium to deal with conflicts.

In this sense, Lowie (1920) emphasizes the relationship between individuals or groups with other individuals and groups, and the way in which joking mediates this interaction, negotiating social conflict situations with humor. According to him, joking relationships play a very important moral role, which is the social control of the group's values. For this author, the system of values that underlies joking relationships is basically the moral framework of society as a whole, with its demand for the defense of honor, dignity and autonomy. This role of ‘moral sanction’ connected to the act of joking is highlighted by Lowie:

> “[...] the [joking] relationship has a more serious function. A man’s jokers are also his moral censors. If he has in any way transgressed the tribal code of ethics or etiquette, a joker will suddenly confront him on a public occasion and twit him with it aloud so that he feels like sinking into the ground with shame. Yet he has no redress but to await a chance for requital.” (Lowie, 1920, p.100)

If the Joke is the Medium then the Message is Laughter

Why do we enjoy jokes? Because they make us laugh? And why do we like to laugh? Because when we laugh it dissipates any tensions we might be holding in our body or our mind. It actually increases the amount of air you breathe in and provides an overall good feeling as it increases the number of endorphins that your brain releases. There is a saying that laughter is the best medicine. In a study of those who survived the Nazi concentration camps it was found that those with a sense of humor or those that were very religious did better than those without either of these characteristics. The well-known quote “medicine is the best medicine” dates back to Hebrew scriptures in Proverbs 17:22 where it is written: “A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.” Laughter actually clinically reduces stress and pain. Laughter can actually lower blood pressure and have a positive effect on the heart. People who laugh at the challenges that life throws at one do much better at resolving these challenges than those that get angry. So as the saying goes laugh and the whole world laughs with you. Friends laugh with each other and enemies just scowl. Laughing together actually creates friendships and social bonds. Laughter is a universal feature of all cultures that creates bonds

and makes the ups and downs of life bearable.

What is the Purpose of Jokes and Joking

In order to fully explore the medium of the joke we must ask the question, what is the purpose of a joke? The main purpose of jokes seems at first blush to be solely about amusement, entertainment, pleasure and to stimulate laughter but there are many other purposes that jokes can serve that are closely related to other forms of humor related to jokes.

We first examine the forms of jokes that are meant solely to be amusing, entertaining and provoke laughter and are for the most part described above by Hetzron (1991) in that they have a punch line. We now turn to the other forms of joking in which the jokester has a purpose above and beyond making people laugh. The joke is of course humorous, and it has the effect of making the listener or viewer laugh, but the purpose of the joke is not always purely for the purpose of saying something funny or to evoke laughter, but it sometimes has a more important darker intention, namely to make a point or attack someone or something that is the focus of the humor as is the case with satire, court jestering, practical jokes, or simply attack jokes.

In order to understand the medium of the joke we will also need to understand humor and what makes something funny and understand what does funny mean and what makes something funny. A joke after all is an utterance that is humorous and is considered funny. But not all jokes or joking about are solely about saying or doing something funny. For example, the joking of the classic jester is not about telling a formal joke with a punch line but rather to make sport of something said at court usually about the king. In fact, the notion of a joke or joking is closely related to satire which like a joke is amusing or humorous but has the added feature to criticize the object of the satire whether it is a person, an organization, a social practice or a political system. A closely related form of joking meant to hurt the subject of the joke is the “practical joke, or prank, a mischievous trick played on someone, generally causing the victim to experience embarrassment, perplexity, confusion, or discomfort which the perpetrators find amusing because we find it funny when something goes awry. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Practical_joke).

A joke is meant to evoke laughter and is meant only as a form of entertainment, whereas satire which might in certain circumstances evoke laughter is primarily meant to reveal a short coming of the object of the satire in a humorous way. A joke can also be used as an offensive weapon to hurt someone. To understand the medium of the joke we must explore these other forms of humor closely related to jokes and are subsumed by the category of jokes such as satire, jest, comedy, and practical jokes.

Satire: A Form of Humor with a Bite

Although satire is humorous its purpose is not the same as that of a joke with a punch line or other forms of comedy. Satire is not meant to be funny and although it is often entertaining that is not its main purpose. Rather satire is a form of social criticism to draw attention to something that the author considers unjust and requires correction. Satire often uses the technique of reductio ad absurdum to show how social injustices violate the audience's sense of fair play. Satirists employs ridicule to make the point of social criticism that the they wish to convey.

Satire has a long history dating back to the ancient Greeks, most notably the plays of Aristophanes; to the Roman playwrights Horace and Juvenal; to novelists through the ages such as Rabelais, Pope, Swift, Dickens, Twain, Sinclair Lewis, Lewis Carroll and Oscar Wilde to philosophers such as Voltaire and Nietzsche to comedians such as Lenny Bruce, John Stewart and Stephen Colbert to the TV show The Simpsons.

Physical and Slapstick Comedy .

In addition to satire there is another form of humor or comedy that does not take the form of a joke with a punch line which is physical or slapstick comedy. The term slapstick comedy is derived literally from a device known as a slap stick consisting "of two thin slats of wood, which make a 'slap' when striking another actor, with little force needed to make a loud—and comical—sound (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slapstick)" without hurting the performer. The form of physical comedy dates back to the Comedia Dell'arte and the Punch and Judy puppet shows and found its way on to stage performances and movies of which the most famous examples are Charlie Chaplain and Buster Keaton in silent films and Laurel and Hardy, Abbot and Costello and Jerry Lewis in talkies. Physical comedy is based on what seems to be a natural tendency for us to laugh at situations when others have an accident in which they suffer only a very minor injury or inconvenience. We also often even laugh at our own minor boo boos.

The Geography of Joking and Laughter in Various Cultures

Since one of the major effects if not the principal effects of jokes, is to make people laugh, let us explore the role of laughter in various cultures. We begin with laughter in Western culture but explore

the role of laughter in other cultures as well.

Western Culture

Laughter and humor were a feature of Western civilization dating back to the ancient Greeks and the plays of Aristophanes and to the Romans and the plays of Plautus and Terrence**.** In the European Middle Age, where religion predominated, laughter and jokes were frowned upon especially in religious communities where laughter and jokes were considered a sign of stupidity or foolishness. However, as Huizinga (2021) remarks, there were a whole range of humorous and playable collective activities at the borders of strict religious practices, as revealed in the many documents exhorting pilgrims not to engage in 'mundane' entertainments on their way to the Holy Land.

In 1524, by means of a satirical and unique style, François Rabelais (1494-1553) published a humorous novel telling the story of *Pantagruel*, a foulmouthed, glutton giant, inventor of puns and jokes based on serious social problems and words of its time. After the huge success of this book and the condemnation of the State and the Catholic church, he published four more novel, *Gargantua, The Third Book of Pantagruel, The Fourth Book of Pantagruel, and The Fifth Book of Pantagruel* each with texts with the same potential for scandal and laughter. Some authors say that Rabelais was the one who restored laughter in the Western culture (Pozenato, 2001). Challenging priests and feudal lords, Rabelais stated that "laughing is human" and as a medical doctor he claimed that "laughter is the best remedy."

Once Rabelais broke the taboo that humor had a proper place in Western culture humorous literature flourished with the works of Cervantes's Don Quixote, Shakespeare's comedies and Voltaire's witty philosophy.

However, Pozenato understands the persistence of some kind of religious and political totalitarianism and radicalism that exist still today is due to an extension of the Middle Age's cultural legacy. For this author, the fundamentalisms we experience today are the contemporary version in real life of the *Agélastes* (those who cannot laugh, in Greek), the fictional people described in Rabelais' novel, those who claims for seriousness and threaten everything that is not taken seriously.

In addition to literary forms of humor the new media of radio and television have been a platform for comedy shows not only in Western cultures but throughout the world. In addition, comedy clubs have sprung up worldwide in which stand-up comics entertain their audiences with jokes and monologues.

Latin America Cultures

Joking and laughter are an important ingredient of Latin America culture. Based on imported formats and relatively recent history, Latin humor does not seem very distant from its foreign models, but it retains its particularities. According to Saliba, the comic made in Brazil brings two outstanding

characteristics of Brazilian society: the confusion between the public and private spheres and the vocation to treat everything emotionally – or cordially, as Sérgio Buarque de Holanda called it. “Brazilian humor is a reflection of our lack of identity”, says the author.

It was in the so-called Brazilian Belle Époque – a period between the two final decades of the 19th century and the end of the 1st. World War 1918 – that humor based on modern journalism and its fixed sections of humor and caricatures emerged, having been further developed later with radio, theater and cinema. The first radio and television programs were created from Brazilian versions of already established Italian and British formats. In the second half of the 20th century, some humorous newspapers appeared, influenced by the British comic group Monty Python, which treated with humor and sarcasm political conservatism. The comedy was directed to the dictatorial period in Brazil. This political scenario has boosted generations of comedians who have consecrated formats of humor programs in use until today. It is as if, in times of censorship, humor was enhanced in its cathartic and therapeutic effect in its way of telling truths disguised as a joke. Nowadays, the stand-up format, despite not being new in Latin America, has enjoyed a lot of popularity, as in other countries, with new artists, new talents and jokes more adapted to recently revisited moral values.

Asian Culture

The role of humor and jokes are quite different in Asian cultures than they are in Western cultures but vary from country to country within Asia as we will discover when we review humor in China, Japan and India. According to a number of studies by Chinese researchers there is a consensus that Chinese do not value humor as much as folks in the West. They attribute this to Confucianism which devalues humor. These studies were summarized by Jiang, Li and Hou (https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00123/full, accessed November 14, 2021):

> In sharp contrast, Easterners’ attitudes toward humor are not that positive. Specifically, in China, Confucianism has devalued humor. Chinese self-actualization denigrates humor while stressing restriction and seriousness... Chinese are reluctant to admit they are humorous out of fear of jeopardizing their social status. Chinese do not think that humor is a desirable personality trait.

The Japanese, on the other hand, have a more relaxed attitude toward humor. They, however do not have stand-up comics as is the practice in the West but they have a comedy form called Manzai that involves two performers the straight man (tsukkomi) and the funny man (boke) in which the boke is the butt of the jokes that are mostly verbal but

also involves some physical activity.

In India stand-up comedy is quite popular with many comedy clubs and TV shows like “The Great Indian Laughter Challenge.” There is even a form of yoga that encourages laughter known as Laughter Yoga (or Hasya Yoga) that is practised by the prime minister of India who posted a video of his yoga workout to encourage his citizens to become more fit. Laughter Yoga is found in a number of Asian countries including Viet Nam, South Korea, Japan, Thailand and China.

African Humor

A survey of cultures in Africa reveals that laughter and joking are a universal feature of the cultures of this continent. Here is one example with a focus of the Manden people.

> The humor culture is deep-rooted in West Africa. Looking through the communication in Mali or Guinea where the Manden people live one can find them bantering, chaffing each other and laughing all the time. First of all, it is because of the system of special joking relationship between different dyamu (clans) and some relatives – senankuya (https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/ecas2019/paper/47612, accessed Feb. 20, 2022).

It is worth mentioning that what is considered funny is not a stable thing. What is considered funny varies from one culture to another, from one generation to another. As a contemporary example, we could cite how "cancel culture" and "generation Z" can take offense, while different audiences receive the same joke as comic relief. Jokes and their reception are culture-specific, but also specific to the generations within them.
Jokes that were once considered a compliment or a funny story to an older generation may not be considered funny to young people and can sometimes be considered offensive or even criminal.

Humor, Dreams, and the Unconscious: Freud’s Take on Jokes

In this section we will describe the psychological dimension of jokes and laughter following the work of Sigmund Freud based his 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* which can be accessed on line at (https://books.google.ca/books/about/Jokes_and_Their_Relation_to_the_Unconsci.html?id=SlZ7y32-BKMC&redir_esc=y, accessed May 1, 2022). Freud begins his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* with a review of the early literature on joke, wit and comedy. At the very first page, he

quotes Lipps (1898) for a definition of joke, recognizing its entirely subjective nature:

> According to Lipps a joke is something comic which is entirely subjective – that is, "something comic which we produce, which is attached to action of ours as such, to which we invariably stand in the relation of subject and never of object, not even of voluntary object (Lipps, 1898, 80)." This is explained further by a remark to the effect that in general we call a joke any conscious and successful evocation of what is comic, whether the comic of observation or of situation' (Freud 1905, 3).

Having established the subjective nature of the effects of jokes Freud then provides a detailed analysis of the psychological dimensions of jokes and their effects on the teller of jokes and the joke teller's audience. In the course of his treatment of jokes he also touches on the technical details that make a joke effective and the cathartic effects of jokes on both the teller and listener.

Freud defines a joke as the "arbitrary connecting or linking, usually by means of a verbal association, of two ideas which in some way contrast with each other (Freud 1905, 4)." Freud (ibid., 120) also suggests that there is a connection between the understanding and analysis of jokes with dreams writing, "We have started from the fact that the techniques of jokes indicate the same processes that are known to us as peculiarities of the dream-work." He describes jokes as a "contrast of ideas, sense in nonsense, bewilderment and illumination (ibid. 4)."

One of the thinkers that influenced Freud's understanding of jokes was Fischer (1889) who considered that "a joke is a playful judgement." According to Freud (1905, 3)

> A joke is a judgement which produces a comic contrast; it has already played a silent part in caricature, but only in judgement does it attain its peculiar form and the free sphere of its unfolding. (Freud, 1905, 3)

In addition to the comic element of the joke, Freud pointed out that is not rare that the joker is a disunited personality, disposed to neurotic disorders, suggesting that

> We get an impression that the subjective determinants of the joke-work are often not far removed from those of neurotic illness… The insufficiency of documentary evidence, however, will certainly prevent our setting up a hypothesis that a psychoneurotic constitution of this kind is a habitual or necessary subjective condition for the construction of jokes (ibid., 103).

The Teller of Jokes

A joke has three elements, the joke itself, the teller of the joke and the joke teller's audience. Freud weighs in for all three elements of the joke describing the motivation of the joke teller, the impact on the listener and the technical aspects that make a joke effective. We begin with the joke teller.

Freud explores the motivation of the joke teller by asking the following question:

"Why are we unable to laugh at a joke we have made ourselves?" and "Why are we driven to tell our own joke to someone else?" Freud relates jokes and the joker to several kinds of technical, psychological, social, cultural, pleasant and cathartic aspects of joke telling suggesting that "we are compelled to tell our joke to someone else because we are unable to laugh at it ourselves" (Freud 1905, 113).

Technically, it would be possible describe a joke as a kind of social interaction where a joke is an aim in itself. Freud provides a categorization with a distinction between the 'innocent joke', the one that aims in itself, the 'hostile joke', with the purposes of aggressiveness, satire or defense and the 'obscene joke', with the purpose of sexual exposure. Thus, he points out the exhibitionism subsumed in a joker: "The motive force for the production of innocent jokes is not infrequently an ambitious urge to show one's cleverness, to display oneself - an instinct that may be equated with exhibitionism (ibid., 104)."

Freud sees a connection between the unconscious mind and humor, expressed in puns, jokes or mockery, Freud reminds us that very often jokes

> are not at the disposal of our memory when we want them; but at other times, to make up for this, they appear involuntarily, as it were, and at points in our train of thought where we cannot see their relevance. These, again, are only small features, but nevertheless indicate their origin from the unconscious. (ibid.,121)

In this sense, by interconnecting conscious and unconscious contents in a light and effective sentence, as well as with a surprisingly simple and perfect timing, a joke has

> quite outstandingly the characteristic of being a notion that has occurred to us involuntarily… We have an indefinable feeling, rather, which I can best compare with an 'absence,' a sudden release of intellectual tension, and then all at once the joke is there - as a rule ready-clothed in words. (ibid.,127)

According to Freud, a joke tells us a lot about the social situation in which it occurs, but it may also reveal a glimpse into the deep unconscious processes which connect affections, desires and social situations. A joke often is a medium to understand our mind of the jokes that occur to us and those that occur to others or to those that others like to repeat.

Freud (ibid., 113) asks

> Why are we unable to laugh at a joke we have made ourselves? and why are we

> driven to tell our own joke to someone else? We can only suspect that… we are compelled to tell our joke to someone else because we are unable to laugh at it ourselves… Laughter is among the highly infectious expressions of psychical states. When I make the other person laugh by telling him my joke, I am actually making use of him to arouse my own laughter; and one can in fact observe that a person who has begun by telling a joke with a serious face afterwards joins in the other person' laughter with a moderate laugh.

Freud suggests that the way in which jokes occur to the joke teller is similar to the way that dreams occur involuntarily in our sleep from the unconscious accompanied by a "sudden release of intellectual tension." The purpose of this spontaneous emergence of a joke is either hostile "the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defense or an obscene joke serving the purpose of exposure (ibid. 121)."

But why does the joke teller feel the need to tell his or her joke and not just enjoy it privately. Freud suggests the joke must be told to complete the psychic process that gave rise to the joke in the first place (ibid., 105) and to enjoy the catharsis that the joke enables.

The Joke Teller's Audience, the Listener

For Freud, jokes are a complex kind of social interaction which is subjective and its success is determined by the recipient of the joke, which Freud illustrates by quoting Shakespeare:

> A jest's prosperity lies in the ear
> Of him that hears it, never in the tongue
> Of him that makes it . . . (Love's Labour Lost, V. 2)

"The pleasure which the joke has produced is more evident in the third person than in the creator of the joke… The hearer gives evidence of his pleasure with a burst of laughter, after the first person has as a rule produced the joke with a tensely serious look (Freud 1905, 105)."

A crucial condition for a joke is that the hearer of the joke should be in accord with the joker "to possess the same internal inhibitions", as "laughing at the same joke is evidence of far-reaching psychical conformity." (ibid., 110). The same point was developed by Adorno and Horkheimer (2012, 115) in *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*: "To be entertained means to be in agreement."

Freud's Description of the Technical Features of a Successful Joke

Freud points out that nonsense, contradiction and the contrast of ideas are used to intensify the joke's effect. For Freud, a joke's effect involves a phenomenon of *catharsis*, Greek term meaning "purgation' or 'purification'. The term was used by Aristotle in his *Poetics* to describe the effect produced on the spectator of the tragedy. He said, that

> Tragedy is an imitation [mimesis] of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude…through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation [catharsis] of these emotions. (Haliwell & Aristotle, 1998, 10)

Here are other technical suggestions that Freuds makes to increase the effectiveness of a joke.

> A joke loses its effect of laughter even in the third person as soon as he is required to make an expenditure on intellectual work in connection with it. The allusions made in a joke must be obvious and the omissions easy to fill; an awakening of conscious intellectual interest usually makes the effect of the joke impossible (Freud 1905,109).
>
> Jokes make use of the following methods. Firstly, they try to keep their expression as short as possible, so as to offer fewer points of attack to the attention. Secondly, they observe the condition of being easy to understand (see above); as soon as they call for intellectual work which would demand a choice between different paths of thought. (ibid., 111).
>
> The laughter is in fact the product of an automatic process which is only made possible by our conscious attention' being kept away from it. Secondly, we are able to understand the peculiar fact about jokes that they only produce their full effect on the hearer if they are new to him, if they come as a surprise to him. This characteristic of jokes (which determines the shortness of their life and stimulates the constant production of new jokes) is evidently due to the fact that the very nature of surprising someone or taking him unawares implies that it cannot succeed a second time." (ibid., p. 112)

Jokes and Catharsis

In psychoanalysis, 'catharsis' is a method of psychotherapy which seeks a "purge" (catharsis), a discharge of pathogenic affects. This method was used by Freud in therapies performed during hypnosis session, at the end of the 19th century. The treatment allows the subject to evoke traumatic past events (Braga, 2016). Even if the original cathartic method has long been discontinued by psychoanalysts, catharsis has never left the central role it plays in the psychoanalytic clinic (Laplanche and Pontalis 1983, 95)

According to Freud there is a connection between joking and catharsis.

> In laughter… the conditions are present under which a sum of psychical energy which has hitherto been used for cathexis is allowed free discharge. And since laughter - not all laughter, it is true, but certainly laughter at a joke - is an indication of pleasure, we shall be inclined to relate this pleasure to the lifting of the cathexis which has previously been present (Freud 1905, 108).

Paralleling Freud, the French author Dugas (1902) described laughter as a phenomenon of relaxation of tension, a release from constraint, even if this release of tension is often tensed by a moral code being subtly imposed, as 'joking relationships' usually do.

Jokes, Puns and Games: Homo Ludens

Play, puns and games like jokes are a form of amusement. We therefore will also consider these forms of amusements making use of Johan Huizinga work as developed in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens* that posits playfulness and games are a part of human nature. It is interesting to observe the repercussion, interest and importance of this work since its release until today. Play is at the genesis of thought, discovery, experience, learning and the possibility of exercising human creativity. Generally taken as trifling, games and play are understood by Huizinga as fundamental elements of any human culture. However, he considers that games are not necessarily associated with laughter. "Children's games, football and chess are played with the utmost seriousness, with no tendency towards laughter in players" (Huizinga, 1971, 8).

Although Huizinga main focus in Homo Ludens is games and playing he considers jokes and joking as a form of playing as he suggests in the following passage from his book.

> All the terms in this loosely connected group of ideas - play, laughter, folly, wit, jest, **joke**, the comic, etc.- share the characteristic which we had to attribute to play, namely, that of resisting any attempt to reduce it to other terms. Their rationale and their mutual relationships must lie in a very deep layer of our mental being.

Elsewhere in *Homo Ludens* Huizinga makes a connection between play, games and jokes or joking in his discussion of the Chinese word wan.

> Professor Duyvendak's friendly help allows me to say something about the Chinese expressions for the play-function. Here too there can be no grouping of all the

> activities we are wont to regard as play, under one head. Most important is the word wan, in which ideas of children's games predominate, but extending its semantic range to the following special meanings: to be busy, to enjoy something, to trifle, to romp, to jest, **to crack jokes**, to make mock of (ibid., 32).

Huizinga references another connection between joking and games citing the work of one of Aristotle's disciples Clearchus who

> wrote a Theory of the Riddle, particularly of the kind called griphos: a joke question-game played for rewards or forfeits. Here is an example of a joke question dating back to the ancient Greeks: "What is the same everywhere and nowhere?" Answer: "Time" (ibid., 148).

Play has a fundamental role in learning. The character of fiction is one of the constitutive elements of play and game, in the sense of creative fantasy and imagination. Jokes, fun, pleasure, games and laughs are elements that are often neglected in sociological theorizing, but they are rigorously developed by Huizinga, who elaborates the philosophical foundation and analytical approaches for the study of culture based on its playfulness. The author also presents an important criticism of the market's distortion of the natural pleasure of playing.

The capitalist appropriation of the "spirit of the game" transforms the human demand for the pleasure of playing into a source of profit, and Huizinga denounces this appropriation as a kind of perversion of a pure, original and creative impulse (Gastaldo, 2012). Additionally, Huizinga poses, as modern administrative working routines and quests for the best performance (namely, 'the world record') 'pervert' the spirit of pure human playfulness and give raise to modern sports; on the same movement, some elements of playfulness are 'perverted' when incorporated into working routines, just like the institution of "goals" for production or sales, of naming a group of co-workers a 'team' or involving different "teams" into a "competition" with each other. It helps to understand Huizinga's grim diagnosis of contemporary ludicity, when we consider that he wrote his book during the Olympic Games of 1936. He saw what Goebbels had done to sport. Most surprising is that many of Goebbels' invention for that 1936 Games were incorporated as a "tradition", such as the parade of athletes separated by country, carrying a flag (before 1936, all the athletes paraded together), as well as the torch run through the streets. Huizinga was right, after all.

Fun and games in McLuhan's theory

Before exploring McLuhan's take on jokes and joking in detail, we first want to point out some of the parallels of McLuhan's ideas with those of Freud and Huizinga. We begin with Huizinga. McLuhan like Huizinga was also interested in games but found ways of thinking of games as media and technologies. He wrote in Chapter 24 of Understanding Media:

> Games are popular art, collective, social reactions to the main drive or action of any culture. Games, like institutions, are extensions of social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal organism. Both games and technologies are counter-irritants or ways of adjusting to the stress of the specialized actions that occur in any social group. As extensions of the popular response to the workaday stress, games become faithful models of a culture. They incorporate both the action and the reaction of whole populations in a single dynamic image (McLuhan 1964, Chapter 24).

The parallels of Freud and McLuhan are in some sense closer than those with Huizinga. Both Freud and McLuhan explored the psychological aspect of joking. This point was discussed in an earlier article of ours.

> For Freud jokes are a way that the unconscious finds a way to express itself and as such reveal the repressed thoughts of the jokester. For McLuhan the joke also reveals something about the jokester, it reveals the hidden grievance of the jokester. McLuhan credits this idea to the comedian Steve Allan who said, 'The funny man is a man with a grievance.'"
>
> We think of humor as a mark of sanity for a good reason: in fun and play we recover the integral person, who in the workaday world or in professional life can use only a small sector of his being (McLuhan 1964, 207). Freud, on the other hand, said that jokes are interrelated ideas, "contrast of ideas, sense in nonsense, bewilderment and illumination (Braga and Logan, 2013)."

Both, McLuhan and Freud, saw jokes and humor as a way of dealing with the stresses of life. They both saw jokes as cathartic for both the originator of the joke as well as their audience. Although humor was the same remedy for partially dealing with anxieties for the two thinkers, they differed in what was

the source of the stress and the anxieties that plagued the jokester. For Freud it is psychological drive and for McLuhan it is the effects of dealing with the frustration of ineffectively dealing with the new technologies in the way they dealt with the older technologies being displaced by the newer ones. Despite this difference in the source of the anxieties they both posited an unnoticed element at play in their understanding of how these anxieties emerged. For Freud it was the unconscious which could only be probed with the help of a psychoanalyst through analysis whereas for McLuhan it was the subliminal effects of the new environments that the new media created and which could only be remedied by the creation of an anti-environment by an artist or a scientist.

But not only did McLuhan write about humor, but he also actually used it as part and parcel of his methodology for understanding media and technology.

> Jokes and joking were part and parcel of his persona and his research methodology. Haberfellner reports that she once heard McLuhan say that puns were the crossroads of meaning, a form of parataxis. No wonder so many straight-laced academics found him and his techniques incomprehensible. McLuhan took jokes quite seriously because of the insights they provide. He once wrote, “I am indebted to funnyman Steve Allen for the observation that all jokes are based on grievances. I ran that backward and got, where there are grievances there are jokes.” The hidden grievances behind McLuhan’s jokes was that he saw with great clarity the effects of electric media but most of his colleagues were unable to see that. His other grievance was that his critics were unable to see the value of his probes, which gave rise to his crack, “Do you think my fallacy is all wrong?” By the way he used this line in Woody Allen’s movie *Annie Hall* when he confronts the young professor in the movie line trying to explain McLuhan’s ideas to his date (Logan 2013, 47).

From what we have read of Freud he seemed to have been a very serious person and not as prone to being as playful as McLuhan.

Final Remarks

McLuhan (https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1369551, accessed April 19, 2019) observed that, “when people become too intense, too serious, they will have trouble in relating to any sort of social game or norm. Perhaps, this is why jokes are so important. On one hand, they tell us about where the problems and grievances are, and, at the same time, they provide the means of enduring these grievances by laughing at the problems.” In terms of figure/ground, the joke is the figure and the grievance, which prompts the joke, is the ground.

Comedians are artists who creates an anti-environment that reveals the grievances of their audience through their jokes and stories. The same is true of the writer of certain novelists that reveal the hidden ground of the social interactions of their society as we mentioned was the case with Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer.

> We think of humor as a mark of sanity for a good reason: in fun and play we recover the integral person, who in the workaday world or in professional life can use only a small sector of his being. (McLuhan, p. 207)
>
> Humor is not a mood but a way of looking at the world. (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

We close our treatment of jokes as a medium with a challenge to our readers. Aside from McLuhan discussing how jokes are about grievances there has not been much treatment of jokes and humor by the media ecology community. We therefore ask you to consider submitting your treatment of jokes and humor from a media ecology/McLuhan perspective to New Explorations. Consider writing a full length article as we have or a shorter piece as a Probe. We look forward to your comments, feedback and hopefully a submission to New Explorations.

Appendix: Etymology

So, let us now consider the etymology of the word joke and all the words associated with jokes such as funny, fun, humor, jest, josh, comedy, comedian, comic, satire, amuse, muse and amusement, which we believe will help us understand the phenomenon of the joke and the joke as a medium. After all a joke is funny, humorous, a form of comedy and amusement, used by comedians, comics and jester to amuse and to have fun but also it can be used to attack or criticize as in satirizing, joshing, jesting or as in making fun of someone or something

Here are the etymologies of these words from https://www.etymonline.com/

Joke (n): 1660s, *joque*, "a jest, something done to excite laughter," from Latin *iocus* "joke, jest, sport, pastime"

Joke (v): 1660s, "to make a joke," from joke (n.) or else from Latin *iocari* "to jest, joke," from *iocus* "joke, sport, pastime."

Funny (adj): “humorous,” 1756, from fun (n) + y(2). Meaning “strange, odd, causing perplexity.”

Fun (n): "diversion, amusement, mirthful sport," 1727, earlier "a cheat, trick" (c. 1700), from verb *fun* (1680s) "to cheat, hoax," which is of uncertain origin, probably a variant of Middle English *fonnen* "befool" (c. 1400; see fond).

Humor (n): mid-14c., "fluid or juice of an animal or plant," from Old North French *humour* "liquid, dampness; (medical) humor" (Old French *humor*, *umor*; Modern French *humeur*), from Latin *umor* "body fluid". Word was transformed from theory that the human body consisted of 4 bodily fluids: blood; phlegm; yellow bile or choler; and black bile (melancholy). [The word evolved into the opposite of black bile or melancholy. The description of things that amuse or make us laugh like a joke or joking with the word humorous comes the flip from melancholy or black bile one of the four original humors or biles of which humans were presumably composed.]

Jest (n): early 13c., *geste*, "narrative of exploits," from Old French *geste* "action, exploit," from Latin *gesta* "deeds," neuter plural of *gestus*, past participle of *gerere* "to carry, behave, act, perform" (see gest, which preserves the original sense). Sense descended through "idle tale" (late 15c.) to "mocking speech, raillery" (1540s) to "joke" (1550s). Also "a laughing-stock" (1590s). *Jest-book* is from 1690s.

Josh (v): "to make fun of, to banter," 1845 (intransitive), 1852 (transitive), American English

Comedy (n): late 14c., "narrative with a happy ending; any composition intended for amusement," from Old French *comedie* (14c.), "a poem" (not in the theatrical sense) and directly from Latin *comoedia*, from Greek *kōmōidia* "a comedy, amusing spectacle," probably [Beekes] from *kōmōidos* "actor or singer in the revels," from *kōmos* "revel, carousal, merry-making, festival" + *aoidos* "singer, poet," from *aeidein* "to sing," which is related to *ōidē* (see ode).

Comedian (n): 1580s, "comic poet," later (c. 1600) "actor in stage comedies," also, generally, "actor;" from French *comédien*, from *comédie* (see comedy). Meaning "professional joke-teller, entertainer who performs to make the audience laugh" is from 1898. Old English had *heahtorsmið* "laughter-maker."

Comic (n): late 14c., "of comedy in the classical sense, pertaining to comedy as distinct from tragedy."

Satire (n): late 14c., "work intended to ridicule vice or folly," from French *satire* (14c.) and directly from Latin *satira* "satire, poetic medley," earlier *satura*, in *lanx satura* "mixed dish, dish filled with various

kinds of fruit," literally "full dish," from fem. of *satur* "sated" (from PIE root sa "to satisfy").

Practical joke (n): "a trick played on someone for the sake of annoying him and raising a laugh at his expense" is from 1771 on the notion of "a jest carried into action"

Amuse(v): late 15c., "to divert the attention, beguile, delude," from Old French *amuser* "fool, tease, hoax, entrap; make fun of," literally "cause to muse" (as a distraction), from "***a"*** at, to" (from Latin *ad*, but here probably a causal prefix) + **"*muser*"** ponder, stare fixedly" (see muse).

Muse (v): "to reflect, ponder, meditate; to be absorbed in thought," mid-14c., from Old French *muser* (12c.) "to ponder, dream, wonder; loiter, waste time," which is of uncertain origin; the explanation in Diez and Skeat is literally "to stand with one's nose in the air" (or, possibly, "to sniff about" like a dog who has lost the scent), from *muse* "muzzle," from Gallo-Roman **musa* "snout," itself a word of unknown origin. The modern word probably has been influenced in sense by muse (n.)

Amusement (n): 1640s, "diversion of attention," especially in military actions, from French *amusement*, noun of action from *amuser.*

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